

US anthrax scare: Why the silence on right-wing terrorism?

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Amid the saturation media coverage of the anthrax attacks in Florida, New Jersey, New York and Washington, DC, a central political issue is being suppressed. There is every likelihood that those responsible for mailing anthrax spores to media and government targets are right-wing extremists bent on spreading panic and creating the conditions for new attacks on democratic rights. Many such elements have close political links to the Republican Party and the Bush administration.

So much misinformation has been spread by government spokesmen and rebroadcast by the media that it is difficult to be sure of many of the facts surrounding the anthrax scare. More than a dozen people have contracted the disease, which is relatively rare among humans but not unusual among farm animals. Three people have died, four others have contracted the more dangerous pulmonary form of the disease. Three letters carrying anthrax spores in powder have been recovered, one at NBC News, one at the *New York Post*, the third at the office of Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle.

Thousands of people have been tested for possible contamination and hundreds of thousands affected by the shutdown of schools, workplaces and public facilities and the cancellation of plane, train and bus service. The overwhelming majority of the reports of possible anthrax contamination have proven to be unfounded or the result of panic, largely provoked by semi-hysterical media coverage.

Dozens of people have tested positive for exposure to anthrax spores, but the majority of these are not actually infected. The significance of these results is not clear. The tests show the presence of disease-fighting antibodies, but there is no way to easily determine when the person came into contact with anthrax. Many of those who initially test positive may not be victims of a recent terrorist attack, but may have merely encountered the bacteria at some time in their lives.

There is similar uncertainty over the significance of the presence of spores, usually in minute quantities, in postal and other mail-processing facilities. Anthrax spores have been known to persist dormant in the soil for up to 80 years. Public health officials have not provided a baseline of the “normal” occurrence of anthrax antibodies in the population, or of anthrax spores in the environment, against which to compare the results of the current tests.

The media, with the tacit encouragement of the Bush administration and congressional leaders, encourages the notion that the anthrax attacks represent a second wave of Middle East-based terrorism, following the September 11 suicide hijackings. There are sporadic attempts to link the anthrax mailings to the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, although none of the evidence so far made public substantiates such suspicions. On the contrary, the circumstances surrounding the anthrax attacks—the method employed, the targets chosen, previous experience—suggest that homegrown American fascists are the perpetrators.

The past two decades have seen the rise within the Republican Party of extreme-right and Christian fundamentalist elements, many of them linked to a fascist underground of racists, militia fanatics and anti-abortion activists. Individuals and groups sharing the political agenda of the ultra-right have been responsible for the vast majority of terrorist actions in the United States in recent years, including the bloodiest such attack in US history prior to September 11—the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing by right-wing militia supporter Timothy McVeigh, which killed 168 people. Anti-abortion extremists have murdered doctors, bombed clinics and planted the bomb that killed one person at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996.

There is a history of rightist elements seeking to obtain anthrax for use as a weapon of terror. In 1998 a microbiologist with ties to white supremacist groups was arrested in Las Vegas on charges of unauthorized possession of an anthrax strain that turned out to be non-lethal. In 1999, in testimony before Congress, FBI Director Louis Freeh said that “a growing number, while still small, of ‘lone offender’ and extremist splinter elements of right-wing groups have been identified as possessing or attempting to develop or use” weapons of mass destruction.

Only last May, Freeh told a congressional committee that the FBI had prevented two “potentially large-scale, high-casualty attacks being planned by organized right-wing extremists.” These included the blowing up of a large propane storage facility in Elk Grove, California, and the raiding of National Guard armories and attacks on electric power lines in several southern states. In the latter case, which involved militia members from Georgia, South Carolina and Florida, Freeh said

the goal was “to create social and political chaos, thereby forcing the US Government to declare martial law, an act the group believed would lead to a violent overthrow of the Government by the American people.”

Rightist elements have a history of making threats involving anthrax. According to a California-based center that monitors such events, there were 172 false anthrax threats in the United States from January 1998 to April 2001. Of these, one third were made against abortion clinics. The current anthrax attacks have been accompanied by a barrage of threats against abortion clinics and Planned Parenthood offices throughout the United States—threats that have gone largely unreported in the media.

The National Abortion Federation said more than 30 clinics in 14 states and the District of Columbia had received letters claiming to contain anthrax, some with references to the Army of God, an extreme-right anti-abortion group. Planned Parenthood said 90 family planning offices and abortion clinics in more than a dozen states had received similar threats. Each of six Planned Parenthood clinics in the Washington, DC area received a powder-filled envelope enclosing a letter from the Army of God that warned, “You have been exposed to anthrax. We are going to kill all of you.”

That right-wing extremists are responsible for the current round of anthrax attacks is further suggested by the choice of targets: Senator Daschle, the most prominent Democrat in Washington, and the offices of the major television networks, regarded by the far right, however incorrectly, as bastions of liberalism. The casualties up to now have all been workers in the federal government and the media, long demonized by the extreme right.

Frequently, what does not appear in the American media is as significant as what does. It is as though the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon blotted out the bloody experience with right-wing terrorism in America—the Unabomber, Oklahoma City, the Aryan Nations, abortion-related bombings and assassinations. If the anthrax attacks had taken place before September 11, the prime suspects would have been anti-abortion zealots or right-wing militia fanatics seeking to avenge the execution of Timothy McVeigh.

The White House and Pentagon recognize that a clear-cut link between the anthrax attacks and homegrown American rightists would cut across their efforts to generate public support for the US military intervention in Central Asia. While admitting that there is no concrete evidence of a connection to Islamic fundamentalists, let alone Iraq, the Bush administration tacitly encourages the belief that Middle East-based terrorists are responsible for the anthrax mailings.

Those actually engaged in investigating the anthrax mailings, however, have been compelled to consider the likelihood of right-wing involvement, and a few hints have begun to creep into the newspaper coverage. According to an October 24 report in the *New York Times*, “investigators who at first thought the anthrax mailed to Mr. Daschle was so finely milled

and highly concentrated that it was likely to have been obtained from a state-sponsored weapons program have now revised their assessment.” An FBI source told the Associated Press the anthrax “could be locally produced given the right circumstances.”

The *Washington Post* reported the same day, “investigators have found no connection between the Sept. 11 plot and the anthrax mailings, numerous officials said yesterday. Although they continue to operate under the assumption that there might be a link, investigators from the FBI, the US Postal Service and other agencies say privately that the mailings do not have the earmarks of an al Qaeda terrorist operation and seem more likely to have come from a domestic source.”

On October 26, White House press spokesman Ari Fleischer declared that federal investigators had concluded that a skilled microbiologist with access to lab facilities could have produced the anthrax used in the mailings, without a vast military or government apparatus. The substance, he admitted, “could be produced by a broader range of people” than the foreign governments generally cited in media speculation, most frequently Iraq and the former Soviet Union.

Even more suggestive is a lengthy front-page article that appeared October 26 in the *Washington Post*, reporting that the anthrax mailed to Daschle’s office had been chemically treated to make it spread more readily through the air. “The United States, the former Soviet Union and Iraq are the only three nations known to have developed the kind of additives,” the newspaper said. The article continued: “A government official with direct knowledge of the investigation said yesterday that the totality of the evidence in hand suggests that it is unlikely that the spores were originally produced in the former Soviet Union or Iraq.”

The statement points to the conclusion that the anthrax mailed to Daschle’s office was either stolen from US military stocks or supplied directly by US military personnel with access to supplies. In either case, it is far more likely that the anthrax was passed to American fascists, who have numerous sympathizers in the military, than to Islamic fundamentalists.



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